

State Dept. review

20 December 1973

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT : The Impact of the 24 October US Alert on the Soviet Leadership

Precis*

--Brezhnev and his colleagues appear to have reacted with greater concern and annoyance to President Nixon's statements of 26 October, which focused public attention on the Soviet threat of unilateral intervention and the US alert, than they did to the alert itself. The implication of a Soviet backdown almost certainly was the trigger.

--From just after the President's press conference of 26 October until just before the USSR's 7 November holiday, Soviet official and semi-official statements on and media coverage of relations with the US showed measurable strain. The US alert was denounced as unjustified by Soviet conduct, and implicit questions were raised about US commitment to existing treaty agreements with the USSR. For the first time, the Soviet media's restrained comment on recent US political scandals gave way to stories linking the erosion of the President's domestic political position and US foreign policy.

--This flurry of adverse comment was relatively brief, however, and by the 7 November holiday the sharper press and diplomatic signs of strain eased. They were replaced, in fact, by an official line that detente had lessened, not worsened, the dangers of the Middle East war. Media coverage of US domestic affairs

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reverted to the circumspect, with praise for the President and his commitment to detente. At the same time, the Soviets put on the public record enough information on developing complications in US domestic affairs to preserve the leadership's options in its public responses to any future US political contingency.

--By the latter half of November, the Soviet leadership's endorsement of the process of making detente irreversible was once again what it had been between the April 1973 Party Plenum and the Middle East war. Brezhnev was typically in the vanguard of those expressing optimism. Statements on US relations--even by Brezhnev--had a more sober tone, however, than those made between the Washington Summit and the war. The postwar statements were more cautious in assessing the extent of the achieved "deepening" of detente with the US, and acknowledged that occasional setbacks were to be expected.

--Brezhnev personally was very much involved in wartime decision-making, and his prestige was especially on the line in negotiations with the US for a ceasefire. As a result, Brezhnev had a personal political stake, as well as a national policy stake in the outcome of this test of detente, especially when the ceasefire failed to take hold, 22-24 October. To the degree that Brezhnev was out in front of his colleagues, this was presumably a factor in Soviet reaction to the ceasefire breakdown, the US alert of 24 October, and the President's comments on the events.

--Soviet leadership statements since the alert show the usual variations in individual leaders' support for detente with the US. All who have spoken, however, appear to be publicly on record in support of the basic

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elements of detente. At some point, Brezhnev could reap political trouble from the Defcon Three episode, but its seriousness would depend on a confluence of other political and policy strains in the leadership. His present degree of power, however, gives him strong defenses against such potential criticism.

- 3 -

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Background

The Middle East war forced Moscow to make some policy decisions to protect and extend its equities in the Middle East at the risk of damaging the Soviet-US relationship. The intrinsic importance of the Middle East to Soviet interests and the effect of the area's fortunes on the overall Soviet position in the socialist and third worlds required this risk-taking, but the Soviets never lost sight of the dangers.

By 19 October, Israel threatened a breakthrough on the battlefield that would have faced Moscow with a choice between a breakdown and a confrontation with the US. It required an immediate readjustment of Soviet tactics. The Soviets promptly invited American cooperation in negotiating a ceasefire; Secretary Kissinger visited Moscow on 20-21 October; and a ceasefire was approved by the Security Council on 22 October. But its failure to take effect raised in more serious form the acute Arab support/US detente dilemma which the Soviets thought they had barely avoided the weekend before. The Arab nations renewed pressure on the Soviets to do something to stop the Israeli advances.

Initial Soviet Reaction 25-26 October

When the US called a Defcon Three alert on the night of 24-25 October in response to indications that the Soviets might unilaterally send troops to the Middle East, the initial Soviet reaction was low key.

Early expressions of Soviet annoyance were confined to semi-official channels at secondary diplomatic levels. A. P. Shitikov, Chairman of one house of the Supreme Soviet, alleged to an American newsman in Moscow on the 25th that Secretary Kissinger had spoken one way in Moscow and another in Tel Aviv the next day. A Soviet Embassy officer in London told a British Labor politician on the 26th that the US alert had seriously damaged but not destroyed detente.

TASS coverage of Secretary Kissinger's press conference on the 25th was positive in tone, stressing joint Soviet-US efforts to achieve a stable peace in the Middle East and omitting any mention of the US alert called the night before. TASS quoted Kissinger's

assertion that "we do not consider ourselves to be in a state of confrontation with the Soviet Union." A few hours after Kissinger's press conference, the USSR supported a UNSC resolution favored by the US that barred permanent members of the Security Council from providing troops for the UN Emergency Force.

On 26 October Brezhnev addressed the World Peace Congress then convened in Moscow. (He had been expected to speak the day before, but evidently held back until he had clarification of the US alert.) Brezhnev held Israel responsible for violations of the 22 October ceasefire, confirmed that the USSR had already sent "representatives" to Egypt at President Sadat's request, and expressed hope that the US would do likewise. Pledging continued Soviet support for efforts to normalize the Middle East situation, he added his only reference to the US alert:

But such cooperation of course cannot be furthered by such actions, undertaken in some NATO countries in the last few days, as the artificial fanning of passions by disseminating all sorts of fantastic speculations about the intentions of the Soviet Union in the Near East. In the present situation a more responsible, honest and constructive approach would, in our view, be more appropriate.

Brezhnev reaffirmed his goal of making detente irreversible, spoke positively of arms limitation negotiations and the importance to them of the Soviet-American relationship, and referred to the President's planned visit to Moscow during 1974. Nevertheless, Brezhnev also voiced a more sober view of the US relationship than he had in earlier speeches. Promising that the USSR would fulfill its treaty obligations with the US, Brezhnev added pointedly, "Naturally, we are expecting the same from the other side." In assessing the prospects for Soviet-US cooperation as "good," he added the qualifications "if one approaches this question in a

responsible and genuine manner, adhering in one's deeds to the principles of mutual convenience and mutual respect..." When he spoke on the same subject in August (Alma Ata) and September (Tashkent), such qualifiers were absent.

Soviet Reaction from early 27 October

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[Redacted] They may have heard President Nixon's press conference of the 26th, which would have been heard from 0200 to about 0300 on the 27th, Moscow time. Some of the President's remarks may have been viewed in Moscow as an escalation of public recriminations that violated their view of quiet diplomacy and required a response. They may have been particularly sensitive to the suggestion of a Soviet backdown and the comparison of October 1973 in Soviet-American relations to October 1962--a humiliating foreign policy defeat for the USSR and a factor in the growth of the political opposition that overthrew Khrushchev two years later.

In any event, the tone of Soviet comment on US actions sharpened noticeably, evidencing real strain in bilateral relations. At about 0630 Moscow time on the 27th, TASS announced it was authorized to state that statements alleging that Soviet actions prior to the US alert gave grounds for concern were "absurd."

Later on the 27th, TASS carried a balanced, positive account of the President's press conference remarks on the Middle East situation. TASS added, however, that the President "tried to justify" the US alert by reference to unspecified alarming information, that US allies were skeptical, and that Secretary of Defense Schlesinger had been "obliged to admit" at an earlier press conference "that he had 'no information' about any actions by the Soviet Union which gave grounds for concern." TASS' final paragraph briefly covered the domestic portion of the President's press conference, relating to the appointment of a new special prosecutor to investigate the "Watergate affair" and pledging the "rapid conclusion of this case," and the use of "all his

strength to fulfill the duties of the post to which he had been elected."

TASS also carried on the 27th extensive reporting of US allies' opposition to the Defcon Three alert. The Soviet central press replayed this and similar coverage over the next two days. The US Embassy in Moscow reported that Soviet press criticism of the US on 28-29 October was the strongest and most direct since the December 1972 bombing of North Vietnam.

Beginning on 28 October, Soviet media also departed for the first time from minimal comment on Watergate and allowed a connection to be established between US domestic politics and foreign policy. On the 28th and 29th Soviet central media carried Western commentary attributing the US alert to the Administration's need to divert attention from domestic political troubles. Sovetskaya Rossiya's commentary ran under the headline "Justified Skepticism." Pravda of 28 October covered the President's press conference with a sharper edge than had the TASS account of the 27th, flatly calling the alert inconsistent with detente. Pravda also added to TASS' account of the domestic portion of the press conference by noting that the President had received sharp questions on Watergate.

A few days later, Soviet media began to initiate an occasional direct commentary on the relationship of US domestic and foreign affairs instead of simply replaying the foreign press. To convey uncertainty about the President's political position, the mass weekly magazine New Times on 2 November ran a brief, factual article on the US impeachment process, the first discussion of this topic in the Soviet press. On 4 November Izvestiya commentator V. Matveyev, speaking on a Moscow Radio panel, followed balanced remarks on detente and the Middle East with this characterization of the alert: "The majority of US commentators link this step not with foreign policy but with domestic factors in the US itself, with the administration's aspiration to deflect public attention from the difficulties it is encountering within the country..."

Meanwhile, Soviet diplomatic reactions also accumulated. On 29 October Ambassador Dobrynin cancelled earlier acceptance of a US diplomatic dinner "because of the present situation." The following day Ambassador Semenov delivered a harsh polemical presentation on the origins of the arms race at SALT negotiating sessions in Geneva.

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[the Soviets still did not know what had provoked the US alert. Vorontsov is reported to have said that the Soviet Government considered the alert a very serious matter and expected US explanations. In what may well have been a signal of Soviet intentions, he added that if the "total unfounded nonsense" in US Government statements about the content of Brezhnev's 24 October message to President Nixon continued, the Soviets might have to publish the text of the message. In otherwise positive remarks on conditions for Middle East peace negotiations on 3 November to West German Minister Scheel, Gromyko called the US alert "irresponsible" and criticized US leniency toward Israel. And]

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[the US alert had been a dangerous overplay which had perplexed the Soviets until they had finally decided that it was domestically motivated.]

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[the Soviets reduced their own heightened military alert status during the 27-31 October period. We cannot say what motivated the Soviets to do this. They may have been wished to back off somewhat from a situation in which both superpowers had portions of their forces on alert, or they may only have been reacting to improved conditions in the Middle East, where the ceasefire had by then taken effect.]

Early November: A More Positive Line Emerges

By the eve of the October Revolution celebrations, Soviet press and diplomatic reaction to the US alert passed from annoyance and some uncertainty into a more positive phase. USA Institute Deputy Director V. S. Zhurkin tentatively struck the new note in speaking to

a visiting US Young Political Leaders group on 5 November. After calling the US alert foolish, clumsy, dangerous, and not credible, Zhurkin concluded that detente not only had survived the Middle East crisis, but had helped ease it. By 8 November a Leningrad public lecturer was also saying that detente had had a beneficial effect on the "dangerous" Middle East situation. Earlier in the month, First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Kuznetsov, negotiating in Cairo, had told a meeting there of East European Ambassadors that Soviet-American detente, although strained by recent Middle East developments, would survive whatever the ultimate outcome of the Arab-Israeli war. And in a speech in New York on 12 November, Ambassador Dobrynin touted detente as influential in easing the Middle East crisis. Pravda on 16 November, in its first major article on the Middle East in a week, was also tentatively optimistic, observing that the Middle East situation would have been worse without improved relations with the US.

In the diplomatic receiving line following the 7 November holiday parade, Brezhnev asked US Charge Dubs to convey his warm greetings to the President. On 15 November TASS carried positive Presidential remarks on international affairs and US-Soviet relations made to a US realtors' convention. At mid-month the Soviet central press was regularly carrying accounts of Presidential statements and initiatives in US domestic affairs; his 7 November energy speech, several Presidential disavowals of any intent to resign or "walk away" from his job, his 12 November statement on Watergate matters, and subsequent related meetings with key US Congressmen. On 12 November the Soviet central press reported Secretary Dent's description of political attacks on the President as "scandalous." At the same time, the Soviet press also continued brief, factual reporting of other US news ranging from Vice President Ford's confirmation to major developments related to subpoenaed Presidential tapes, including missing segments, and the continuing House committee investigation of possible grounds for impeachment proceedings. An article by V. F. Rubtsov on the Middle East crisis in the December issue of the USA Institute's journal, signed to the press on 19 November, expressed the belief that the alert was "not unconnected."

with the influence of the US military-industrial complex, but also noted that the alert was "not least linked with US internal political problems."

The net impression of Soviet media treatment of US domestic affairs since mid-November, however, has been one of continued respect for and confidence in the President as the principal US supporter and spokesman for detente. The same Leningrad lecturer who on 8 November credited detente with improving Middle East prospects equated "American Zionists," opposed to both a Middle East solution and Soviet-US detente, with the President's domestic critics who were trying to take advantage of his Watergate difficulties. This theme has also been a persistent one in comments of high Soviet officials. At the same time, enough Watergate-related developments have been mentioned by Soviet media to preserve Soviet options in responding to any conceivable future development on the US scene. A Moscow public lecturer who on 11 November fielded a number of audience questions on Watergate attributed the situation generally to "dirty" American politics and avoided answering questions on the President's prospects. Pravda commentator Yu. Zhukov devoted part of his question and answer TV program on 24 November to a fairly comprehensive explanation of the Watergate affair that also featured a sympathetic portrait of a beleaguered President, and concluded with a reminder that the matter was strictly a US internal affair and a "vivid illustration of the ways of American democracy."

Since early November, Soviet leadership views and statements on Soviet-American relations have gradually moved out of the shadow of events surrounding the US alert. There remains a residue, however, in the form of more cautious appraisal of the stage of development reached to date in Soviet-US detente than was typical of the period between the 1973 Summit and the Middle East war. The traditionally heavily coordinated leadership speech on the eve of the October Revolution holiday, given this year by Kirilenko, characterized the current stage of detente as less advanced than had pre-war official statements. Kirilenko spoke of Soviet-American relations as having "begun evolving in the direction of "detente" and of "prospects for" mutually advantageous cooperation.

In a discussion on 16 November, Chief of the General Staff Kulikov braced the US Defense Attaché with another protest about Defcon Three, but this seems to have been the last Soviet semi-official reminder. The extensive press coverage of Kissinger's 22 November press conference omitted all portions discussing the US alert. Prominent Soviet press coverage of the 40th anniversary of Soviet-US diplomatic relations was generally positive. In remarks at a US Embassy reception on 15 November honoring the occasion, USA Institute Director Arbatov, after rehearsing a history of earlier lost bilateral opportunities, welcomed the current political "realism" of the US. Arbatov was somewhat defensive on detente, arguing that if "hard facts" were reviewed and "emotions" put aside, the Middle East would be shown not to have canceled out all the recent positive changes in Soviet-American relations, but to have confirmed them with renewed force. Arbatov's muted tone was in keeping with the generally sober Middle East aftermath mood on detente.

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[redacted] as of mid-November Arbatov's institute was under criticism from Soviet leaders for predicting that any renewed Middle East hostilities would result in a quick Israeli victory, and also for underestimating the importance of Congress in US Government activity. As Congressional debates over MFN evolved, Soviet leaders are alleged to have said that had they realized the extent of Congress' power, they would have invited more Congressional delegations to Moscow.

Brezhnev himself seems to have publicly recovered from whatever misgivings the Defcon Three alert may have caused him. Meeting with Armand Hammer on 16 November, Brezhnev devoted his time on NBC's TV camera to enthusiastic comments on detente. In an address to the Indian Parliament on 29 November, his first speech since 26 October, Brezhnev added his own public endorsement of the new line that the Middle East crisis would have been "far more dangerous" without detente. He credited "the most farsighted leaders of Western states, realistically assessing the situation," with making peaceful coexistence possible. He assessed the present stage of detente more optimistically than had the leadership's 6 November speech, saying that the turn

- 11 -

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from cold war to peaceful coexistence was "gradually becoming reality." He characterized improved Soviet-US relations as important for a stable, durable international peace, and cited the bilateral Agreement on Prevention of Nuclear War as benefiting all nations.

Brezhnev also acknowledged the difficulties occasionally retarding detente, however. "Like all the significant changes in historical development, this change in relations between the USSR and USA is proceeding not very simply in the context of struggle of different forces, with some zigzags and hitches."

Current Leadership Differences Over the US?

Brezhnev has all along been the USSR's leading salesman for detente, and he also has the heaviest personal investment in it. Thus it was predictable that his public stance would be in the vanguard of Soviet efforts to turn from Middle East strains on detente back to the task of deepening detente with the US.

Of Brezhnev's Soviet leadership colleagues, Kosygin, Kirilenko, Suslov, Shelepin and Shcherbitskiy have all made speeches since 6 October. Their individual support of improved Soviet-US relations has varied in degree; none was as ebullient as Brezhnev before the war, and since then all have been at least as reserved as his 26 October speech. But even Shelepin--who in this group is the one at greatest apparent arms' length from detente, as evident in his speech in Havana on 12 November--told Australian Labor Party leader Hawke in Moscow on 22 or 23 November that the US Administration seemed genuinely to be seeking world peace and detente. Shelepin also expressed his confidence in President Nixon's ability to complete his term. Kosygin, in Minsk on 14 November, endorsed the contribution of detente to easing Middle East tensions. Suslov, speaking in Vilnyus on 28 November, gave support to making detente irreversible, although he surrounded his endorsement with cautionary remarks.

This overt consensus does not prove that old strains may not have reappeared behind the scenes as the Middle East war tested detente's viability in a crisis involving conflicting Soviet and US interests. Indeed, it is

likely that they did. Arbatov acknowledged as much on 23 October to US Charge Dubs, commenting that the crisis had caused in some Soviet official circles a resurfacing of heretofore dormant "serious doubts" about the policy of improving relations with the US.

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the 19 October invitation to Secretary Kissinger to come to Moscow to work out a ceasefire was at Brezhnev's own initiative, and that one or more of his leadership colleagues may have expressed reservations on the invitation. In any case, Brezhnev was the only Politburo member to meet with Kissinger with the exception of Gromyko, who is perhaps Brezhnev's closest current supporter on US relations in the Politburo. Brezhnev was thus potentially vulnerable when the 22 October ceasefire began to come apart.

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Soviet pressure on the US for joint enforcement of the ceasefire was probably in part

- 13 -

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designed to minimize Brezhnev's political exposure. The US alert of 24 October, and especially subsequent official US calling of attention to the confrontation aspects of the episode, probably in turn renewed Brezhnev's potential vulnerability and led to the subsequent sharp and then more sober phases of fallout in Soviet-US relations described above.

- 14 -

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